DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 254 319 PS 014 935

AUTHOR Almerud, Peter
TITLE Culture in the Swedish Preschool. Current Sweden No. 324.
INSTITUTION Swedish Inst., Stockholm.
PUB DATE Aug 84
NOTE 9p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Artists; *Community Resources; *Creative Expression; *Cultural Activities; *Cultural Awareness; Cultural Enrichment; *Fine Arts; Foreign Countries; Museums; Music Education; *Preschool Education; Public Libraries; Teacher Education; Theaters
IDENTIFIERS *Sweden

ABSTRACT

Serious discussion of the status of children's culture in Sweden began 15 to 20 years ago. Today, it is increasingly realized that children need and have a right to personal artistic experiences. A report presented in the spring of 1983 by the National Council for Cultural Affairs on interaction between preschools and local cultural life prompted municipalities to invest greater effort in cultural activities at preschools. Another effect of the study was to bring about reassessment of training requirements for preschool teachers and child recreation leaders. Following the major expansion of Sweden's preschool system in the 1970's, discussion today increasingly centers on the content of preschool education. By bringing to life children's cultural heritage and traditions and thereby rooting children in their own environment, cultural activities accomplish an important end. Specifically, the aim of such activities is to integrate culture in children's day-to-day life by providing continual contacts with libraries, municipal schools of music, museums, theatres, and practicing artists, rather than by presenting culture as something apart from life. (Author/CB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

SVENSKA INSTITUTET · THE SWEDISH INSTITUTE · SI

Current Sweden

Published by
the Swedish Institute

ED254319

PS 014935

CULTURE IN THE SWEDISH PRESCHOOL

BY PETER ALMERUD

Serious discussion of the status of children's culture in Sweden began 15-20 years ago. Today it is increasingly realized that children need and have a right to personal artistic experiences. A report presented in the spring of 1983 by the National Council for Cultural Affairs, on interaction between preschools and local cultural life, prompted the municipalities to invest greater effort in cultural activities at preschools. Another effect of the study was to bring about a reassessment of training requirements for preschool teachers and child recreation leaders.

Following the major expansion of Sweden's preschool system in the 1970s, discussion today increasingly centres on the content of preschool education. By bringing to life children's cultural heritage and traditions, and thereby rooting children in their own environment, cultural activities fulfil an important task. The aim is to integrate culture in children's day-to-day life by means of continual contacts with libraries, municipal schools of music, museums, theatres and practising artists, rather than presenting it as something apart, a separate piece of decor.

PETER ALMERUD IS ACTING DIRECTOR OF INFORMATION AT THE NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR CULTURAL AFFAIRS.

The author alone is responsible for the opinions expressed in this article.

SVENSKA INSTITUTET
Box 7434
S-103 91 Stockholm
Sweden

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Swedish Inst.
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

NO 324
AUGUST 1984

For free publication or background use

Culture in the Swedish Preschool

A wide-ranging debate on children's culture took place in Sweden during the 1970s and the result today is a fairly vigorous programme of cultural activities. In recent years many local authorities have given priority to children's culture, created special posts to deal with it, allocated funds to finance it, etc. Special children's librarians have been appointed at many libraries. Independent theatre groups and regional repertory companies now have considerable experience of performing for children. Music institutions put on special concerts for children and collaborate with preschools, among others. Museums construct their new exhibitions with children in mind, organize children's camps, take their activities into the schools and preschools, and so on. There are tendencies in all these directions but often they are no more than that. It is still not uncommon for children's activities to have low status. Not all libraries have children's librarians. Many music institutions have done little to develop programmes for children. But a general awareness of the need to concentrate more on children does exist, as well as a stated objective that they should be given priority. As a result, people no longer have to be convinced of the need for cultural activities for younger children, as was the case a few years ago. Instead, attention has now focused on culture and cultural environments for older children, primarily at schools and youth centres.

When the status and content of children's culture in Sweden began to be discussed seriously 15-20 years ago, the debate had strong ideological overtones, in particular criticizing commercial or "junk" culture. In such a climate a term like "the fine arts" seemed a little inappropriate and praise for aesthetic values tended to fall on deaf ears. This was no longer the case, however, two years ago when educational expert Bertil Sundin, an experienced debater and researcher, published a book entitled "Children and the Fine Arts", commissioned by the Cultural Council. Among other things, it caused a professor of art specializing in children's culture, Dr Gunnar Berefeldt, to express publicly his delight that at last people dared once again to uphold aesthetic values when discussing children and culture in Sweden.

However, this does not mark a return to a traditional, conservative view of culture. Rather, the debate started with the acknowledgement

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

of the right of children to cultural involvement, proceeded to the view that their own creativity was a vital feature of their development, and then recognized that they need and have a right to artistic experiences of their own.

The present cultural policy for children is largely based on a government bill submitted to Parliament in the spring of 1979. It sketched a number of guidelines:

- Children must be granted access to all kinds of culture, not just to a separate children's culture. The boundary that is sometimes drawn between children's culture and culture for adults is unfounded. The basic problem does not lie in creating forms of cultural activity specially for children but in providing them with greater access to cultural life in general. Also, children need help in discovering what interests them in the range of culture available.

- As far as possible, cultural efforts should be concentrated in children's normal environment. In this way all children could be reached and the projects could be tailored naturally to suit their needs and experiences.

- Emphasis must be placed on children's own creative activities. Much of what goes on in the children's world inhibits their creativity. This is not only true of the mass media's extensive offerings. In school, too, for example, children are almost always forced to adopt the role of recipient. There is little room for free creativity. It is important, therefore, that the children's own involvement should permeate their cultural activities.

- Special attention must be paid to underprivileged children. The cultural situation for children differs greatly from one social group to another. Therefore it is necessary to make special efforts to help children lacking cultural opportunities.

Although Parliament did not consider it necessary to lay down any particular guidelines for work in the field of children's culture, the ones contained in the bill have nevertheless come to function as pointers for the efforts made since 1979. Thus a basic premise has been that cultural activities should be concentrated in the children's normal environments. There are two strong reasons for this. One is that it is easier to reach children of all categories by going into their own environments, so that they have access to culture on equal terms. The other is that culture in this way becomes a natural feature of the children's daily life instead of something separate from it.

The bill on children's culture suggests three natural areas for cultural endeavours: school, preschool and recreational activities. So far, attention has focused on the preschool, to some degree on the school and only in the past year on recreational activities. In the latter case, certain efforts have been made here and there but they have been few and far between and have had only a marginal effect on the environments where children mostly spend their time.

The bill called on the National Council for Cultural Affairs set up a commission to study the interaction between preschool and local cultural life. The study was launched in the autumn of 1979 and completed

in the spring of 1983. The commission's work has already had a number of effects:

- The mere fact that a study was carried out acted as an incentive on those local authorities planning or already working on cultural activities in the preschool.

- The Government has commissioned the National Board of Universities and Colleges to join with the National Board of Health and Welfare in reassessing training programmes for preschool teachers and child recreation leaders, one of the aims being to prepare the ground for better cultural activities. The two bodies were directed to take into account the proposals contained in the report from the Council for Cultural Affairs.

- The Swedish Association of Local Authorities, coordinating body for Sweden's municipalities, has held regional conferences throughout the country so that politicians and civil servants can discuss the study.

The commission's report puts forward ideas and proposals concerning the development of culture in the preschool. They are pervaded by the view that culture cannot be separated from other fields of activity but must be seen as a dimension of all preschool education. Thus the proposals aim to change the whole preschool. They are therefore addressed principally to the municipalities, who are responsible at the local level for the preschool, to the National Board of Health and Welfare, which produces central guidelines for the work, and to the universities, which are responsible for training preschool teachers. The study sets out the cultural policy tasks of the preschool and describes how they may be concretely manifested in preschool work.

After expanding rapidly during the 1970s, with attendant "growing pains", the Swedish preschool today reaches a quarter of all children of requisite age. The 1970s were mainly spent discussing how the preschool system could be expanded as quickly as possible. The goal was to provide preschool places for all children requiring care while their parents worked or studied. The targets drawn up were quantitative ones. Therefore, greater effort was concentrated on building the preschools and filling them with children and staff than on what was to go on inside them. Many critics argued that the policy objectives laid down at the beginning of the 1970s isolated the preschool from the adult world around it and that the preschool programme of that era never became clear in content.

As the expansion of the Swedish economy slowed, so did the expansion of the preschool system. This gave the local authorities, and to a certain extent also the central government, a breathing space. Up to then, expansion of the system itself had occupied everyone's energies. Now attention began to switch to the content of what had been built up. In that situation, the commission's report could scarcely have arrived at a better moment. It is worth noting that those local authorities contacted by the commission in the course of its study were favourably inclined towards culture in preschools. But it was more a case of a general interest in the idea or of a willingness that had yet to be translated into concrete form. Also, ways and means of achieving the desired ends did not exist. For instance, cultural

questions were rarely dealt with in the child care planning programmes drawn up annually by the local councils.

In the opinion of the Council for Cultural Affairs there is considerable scope for creativity and aesthetic activities in the preschool. Accordingly, there is every prospect that a type of preschool can be developed in which various kinds of cultural activity have a central place in the overall work. This would make the preschool a better place for both staff and children. But culture should not be regarded as something that comes "from outside" and is offered to the preschool, nor just as something to pursue in one's spare time when one feels a need for some extra splashes of colour to brighten one's day. It is more a case of something fundamental in preschool education, in which children actively take part and which is vitally important for their development.

Not all children have equal access to the cultural activities available in the community. The commission sees greater concentration on preschool culture as a way of remedying this situation, of reducing the differences in children's cultural opportunities. These differences are closely tied up with the parents' educational backgrounds, the family's economic standard and home environments. Therefore, the report says, society should not just promote a broad, generalized form of culture for children. Instead of reducing inequality, that would simply cement it by providing even better cultural access for children already in a privileged position. Directing cultural efforts at the preschool, on the other hand, is a way of combatting inequality in society.

When talking about culture in the preschool in its study, the Council means artistic and aesthetic activities in all fields of the arts, embracing creative activities of one's own as well as those presented by others. A basic starting point in preschool culture, it says, should be the need of children to acquire knowledge of the world around them through their own experience. Aesthetic activities help to strengthen children's ability to make more discoveries, to discern more of life's subtle shades and to express themselves in language that is versatile and rich in nuance. Activities based upon cultural heritage and cultural heritage and cultural traditions also serve to give children roots and security in the environments they are growing up in.

Ultimately, these aesthetic activities can be regarded as various language forms. The less scope there is for aesthetic activities, the more they decline and the children are left culturally poorer as a result.

Increasingly, we come across the contrast between the ideal image and the ominous image: the child that has lost its spontaneous, natural way of relating to aesthetic activities, children who are too shy to dance, boys who think singing is "girlish", children who cannot play but have become locked into alien patterns of behaviour and roles borrowed from such sources as the mass media.

One of the preschool's most important tasks is to combat the development of the ominous image and to help children develop towards the ideal.

In playing creative games children use the various art forms in an integrated way. A child who is busy painting often sings at the same time. A child listening to music wants to dance. A child may have difficulty, for instance, in sitting still during an ordinary concert performance —"you just have to dance to music", as one six-year-old girl from a day nursery south of Stockholm put it.

The various forms of expression, then, are woven together in the children's world. Yet because the adult world traditionally divides up art forms and fields of art it is necessary to make the same distinction when discussing cultural contributions in the preschool.

Children's activities do not take place in a vacuum. They derive nourishment from the outside world. Coming into contact with art and artists helps to stimulate children's imagination and inspire them in their own activities. Such contacts are not, of course, any guarantee for a positive development of a child's creativeness. But when art and its practitioners meet children at a high quality level and with honest intentions, in other words genuinely expressed and not patronishingly, the meeting can be an important experience for children and stimulate their own creativity.

Consequently, the cultural activities of the preschool must be developed in close collaboration with local cultural life. Cultural institutions such as libraries, schools of music, museums and theatres, as well as the various cultural groups and associations, have an important role to play in, and for, the preschool. Their breadth of knowledge and their work must be allowed to benefit the preschool.

The libraries have already developed collaboration with the preschool. In recent years the number of children's librarians has increased significantly and today every regional library has a county children's librarian whose tasks include helping out municipalities lacking children's librarians of their own. These county librarians see the preschool as a natural collaborator. However, much remains to be done in developing the use of literature at preschool level.

Municipal schools of music are to be found throughout the country. They have been set up to supplement the musical training given in the ordinary school and they provide voluntary tuition for children and young people of school age. In some places, teachers at the municipal schools of music assist teachers working with music at compulsory school, for example by acting as companion teachers in primary school classes. The municipal music school system has expanded considerably in recent decades and in the 1980/81 academic year it provided 370,000 students with 100,000 40-minute lessons a week from 6,000 teachers.

So far, schools of music in only a small number of municipalities have been involved in preschool activities. These few, however, have provided good examples of how teachers from the municipal school of music can support preschool staff and help them to develop various ways in which children can create music.

The museums, which are a sort of memory bank for the community, can show how people's lives and work used to be, while the theatres have every opportunity to furnish children with rich emotional experiences that stimulate the imagination and promote insight and understanding.

Children also need to meet the artists, the people responsible for the artistic expressions. Individual artists visiting preschools can demonstrate ways of working and give staff and children alike an artistic incentive. Close collaboration between artist and pedagogue can help deepen a child's experience. This approach has emerged as the most successful one among the many municipalities that have worked with preschool culture for lengthy periods. One method, used by a Gothenburg group working with culture in the preschool, is to get in touch with a theatre company putting together a play for preschool children and discuss what should be in it. The theatre company is assured that the idea is not to encroach upon its artistic freedom but to contribute knowledge about children and pass on wishes concerning content expressed by preschool staff. Another method, used in the Stockholm suburb of Solna, is to call together artists who are active in the preschools for regular meetings. Or, as is practised in many places, to involve artists in further training for preschool staff.

Preschool culture also has to do with cultural heritage and identity, providing children with roots, bringing traditions to life and helping children to understand that modern ways of living, customs, modes of work and attitudes all have their roots in earlier ages. In many of the new housing environments—where the preschools are often situated—there is almost no evidence of such historical links. To discover them, or to pin down the area's identity, requires sound knowledge on the part of the researcher. An important task for preschool staff is to provide the children with living roots in their own environment.

The staff must bring their knowledge and commitment to bear if preschool culture is to succeed at all. Both the choice and the carrying out of cultural activities demand a degree of knowledge. Also, the staff are important as models of behaviour for the children. By taking part in projects in a committed manner, they show the children that what they are doing is something important. In this way, they influence the choices made by the children.

It is necessary, therefore, to revise both the basic and advanced education of preschool staff in order to build up their knowledge and skills in the cultural sphere. In its report, the Council points to the necessity of strengthening the position of aesthetic subjects in preschool teacher training and of making use of the knowledge and work of artists and cultural institutions in training courses.

The Council for Cultural Affairs also feels that opportunities for further education should be created in the aesthetic sphere and that courses run by the universities in the field of children's culture should be expanded and given the status of advanced training for preschool staff. It also calls on the local authorities to increase this type of further education in the courses they run for their employees.

The Council for Cultural Affairs concludes that if the preschool's cultural activities are to get the requisite support the local authorities must specify in one or other of the relevant document—child care planning programmes or municipal policy statements—how they intend to back such a development. In the same way, the National Board of Health and Welfare in its central directives for preschool work must specify the role that culture is to play.

Translation: Stephen Croall

Recent issues of Current Sweden:

No

313 - Paul Nordgren: Advanced in Swedish Tobacco Policy

314 - Margareta Törngren and Bengt Alexanderson: The Swedish Library System

315 - Carl Gustaf Boëthius: Swedish Sex Education and Its Results

316 - Ingne Gustafsson: Decentralisation in Sweden

317 - Björn Jonsson: Sweden's Economic Development in the 1980s

318 - Karl Erik Gustafsson: Press Subsidies in Sweden Today—Structure and Effects

319 - The 1984 Research Policy Bill

320 - Lillemor Thalin: Current Economic Trends in Sweden

321 - Bertil Ekdahl: Child Custody Rules in the Context of Swedish Family Law

322 - Lena Berke: Economic Crime in Sweden

323 - Karin Grönvall: Improving Children's Physical and Psychological Environment.